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# THE EVOLUTION OF STYLE IN MODERN ARCHITECTURE.\*

BY THOMAS HASTINGS.

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THE architectural style or language of any time in history is, and always has been, a universal language common to all peoples. In solving problems of modern life, the essential is not so much to be national or American, as it is to be modern and of our own period.

The question of supreme interest is, What influence life in its different phases has upon architectural style. Style in architecture is that method of expression in the art which has varied in different periods, almost simultaneously throughout the civilized world, without reference to the different countries, beyond slight differences of national character mostly influenced by climate and temperament. Surely modern architecture should not be the deplorable creation of the would-be style-inventor, or that of the illogical architect, living in one age and choosing a style from another!

The important and indisputable fact is not generally realized that from prehistoric times until now each age has built in one, and only one, style. Since the mound-builders and cave-dwellers, no people, until modern times, ever attempted to adapt a style of a past epoch to the solution of a modern problem; in such attempts is the root of all modern evils. In each successive style there has always been a distinctive spirit of contemporaneous life from which its root drew nourishment. But in our time, contrary to all historic precedents, there is a confusing selection from the past of every variety of style. Why should we not be modern and have one characteristic style expressing the spirit of our own

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life? History and the law of development alike demand that we build as we live.

One might consider the history and development of costumes to illustrate the principle involved. In our dress to-day we are modern, but sufficiently related to the past; which we realize when we look upon the photographs of our ancestors of only a generation ago. We would not think of dressing as they did, or of wearing a Gothic robe or a Roman toga, but as individual as we might want to be we would still be inclined, with good taste, to dress according to the dictates of the day.

The irrational idiosyncrasy of modern times is the assumption that each kind of problem demands a particular style of architecture. Through prejudice, this assumption has become so fixed that it is common to assume that if building a church or a university we must make it Gothic; if a theatre, we must make it Renaissance. One man wants an Elizabethan house, another wants his house early Italian. With this state of things, it would seem as though the serious study of character were no longer necessary. Expression in architecture, forsooth, is only a question of selecting the right style!

The two parties with which we must contend are, on the one hand, those who would break with the past, and on the other those who would select from the past according to their own fancy.

Style in its growth has always been governed by the universal law of development. If from the early times, when painting, sculpture and architecture were so closely combined, we trace their progress through their gradual development and consequent differentiation, we can but be impressed by the way in which one style has been evolved from another. This evolution has always kept pace with the progress of the political, religious and economic spirit of each successive age. It has manifested itself *unconsciously* in the architect's designs, under the imperatives of new practical problems and of new requirements and conditions imposed upon him. This continuity in the history of architecture is universal. As in nature, the types and species of life have kept pace with the successive modifications of lands and seas and other physical conditions imposed upon them, so has architectural style in its growth and development until now kept pace with the successive modifications of civilization. For the principles of de-

velopment should be as dominant in art as they are in nature. The laws of natural selection and of the survival of the fittest have shaped the history of architectural style just as truly as they have the different successive forms of life. Hence the necessity that we keep and cultivate the historic spirit, and that we respect our historic position and relations, and that we more and more realize in our designs the fresh demands of our time, more important even than the demands of our environment.

What determining change have we had in the spirit and methods of life since the revival of learning and the Reformation to justify us in abandoning the Renaissance or in reviving mediæval art, Romanesque, Gothic, Byzantine or any other style? Only the most radical changes in the history of civilization, such as, for example, the dawn of the Christian era and of the Reformation, and the revival of learning, have brought with them correspondingly radical changes in architectural style.

Were it necessary, we could trace two distinctly parallel lines—one the history of civilization, the other the history of style in art. In each case we should find a gradual development, a quick succession of events, a revival, perhaps almost a revolution, and a consequent reaction, always together, like cause and effect, showing that architecture and life must correspond. In order to build a living architecture, we must build as we live.

Compare the Roman orders with the Greek and with previous work. When Rome was at its zenith in civilization, the life of the people demanded of the architect that he should not only build temples, theatres and tombs, but baths, palaces, basilicas, triumphal arches, commemorative pillars, aqueducts and bridges. As each of these new problems came to the architect, it was simply a new demand from the new life of the people; a new work to be done. When the Roman architect was given such varied work to do, there was no reason for his casting aside all precedent. While original in conception, he was called upon to meet these exigencies only with modifications of the old forms. These modifications very gradually gave us Roman architecture. The Roman orders distinctly show themselves to be a growth from the Greek orders, but the variations were such as were necessary in order that the orders might be used with more freedom in a wider range of problems. These orders were to be brought in contact with wall or arch, or to be superimposed upon one another, as in a

Roman amphitheatre. The Roman recognition of the arch as a rational and beautiful form of construction, and the necessity for the more intricate and elaborate floor plan, were among the causes which developed the style of the Greeks into what is now recognized as Roman architecture.

We could multiply illustrations without limit. The battlements and machicolated cornices of the Romanesque, the thick walls and the small windows placed high above the floor, tell us of an age when every man's house was indeed his castle, his fortress and stronghold. The style was then an expression of that feverish and morbid aspiration peculiar to mediæval life. The results are great, but they are the outcome of a disordered social status not like our own, and such a status could in no wise be satisfied with the simple classic forms of modern times—the architrave and the column.

Compare a workman of to-day building a Gothic church, slavishly following his detail drawings, with a workman of the fourteenth century doing such detail work as was directed by the architect, but with as much interest, freedom and devotion in making a small capital as the architect had in the entire structure; perhaps doing penance for his sins, he praises God with every chisel stroke; his life interest is in that small capital; for him work is worship; and his life is one continuous psalm of praise. The details of the capital, while beautiful, may be grotesque, but there is honest life in them. To imitate such a capital to-day, without that life, would be affectation. Now a Gothic church is built by men whose one interest is to increase their wages and diminish their working-hours. The best Gothic work has been done and cannot be repeated. When attempted it will always lack that kind of mediæval spirit of devotion which is the life of mediæval architecture.

We might enumerate such illustrations indefinitely. If one age looks at things differently from another age, it must express things differently. With the revival of learning, with the new conceptions of philosophy and religion, with the great discoveries and inventions, with the altered political systems, with the fall of the Eastern Empire, with the birth of modern science and literature, and with other manifold changes all over Europe, came the dawn of the modern world; and with this modern world there was evolved what we should now recognize as the modern archi-

ture, the Renaissance which pervaded all the arts and which has since engrossed the thought and labor of the first masters in art. This Renaissance is a distinctive style in itself, which, with natural variations of character, has been evolving for almost four hundred years.

So great were the changes in thought and life during the Renaissance period that the forms of architecture which had prevailed for a thousand years were inadequate to the needs of the new civilization, to its demands for greater refinement of thought, for larger truthfulness to nature, for less mystery in forms of expression and for greater convenience in practical living. Out of these necessities of the times the Renaissance style was evolved—taking about three generations to make the transition—and around no other style have been accumulated such vast stores of knowledge and experience, under the lead of the great masters of Europe. Therefore, whatever we now build, whether church or dwelling, the law of historic development requires that it be Renaissance, and if we encourage the true principles of composition it will *involuntarily* be a modern Renaissance.

Imagine the anachronism of trying to satisfy our comparatively realistic tastes with Gothic architectural sculpture or painting made by modern artists! Never until the present generation have architects presumed to choose from the past any style, in the hope to do as well as was done in the time to which that style belonged. In other times they would not even restore or add to a historic building in the style in which it was first conceived. It is interesting to notice how the architect was even able to complete a tower or add an arcade or extend a building, following the general lines of the original composition, without following its style, so that almost every historic building within its own walls tells the story of its long life. How much more interesting are these results alike to the historian and the artist!

In every case where the mediæval style has been attempted in modern times the result has shown a want of life and spirit simply because it was an anachronism. The result has always been dull, lifeless and uninteresting. It is without sympathy with the present or a germ of hope for the future—only the skeleton of what once was. We should study and develop the Renaissance, and adapt it to our modern conditions and wants, so that future generations can see that it has truly interpreted our life. We

can interest those who come after us only as we thus accept our true historic position and develop what has come to us. Without this we shall be only copyists, or be making poor adaptations of what was never really ours.

The time must come, and, I believe, in the near future, when architects of necessity will be educated in one style, and that will be the style of their own time. They will be so familiar with what will have become a settled conviction, and so loyal to it, that the entire question of style, which at present seems to be determined by fashion, fancy or ignorance, will be kept subservient to the great principles of composition, which are now more or less smothered in the general confusion.

Whoever demands of an architect a style not in keeping with the spirit of his time is responsible for retarding the normal progress of the art. We must have a language if we would talk. If there be no common language for a people there can be no communication of ideas, either architectural or literary. I believe that we shall one day rejoice in the dawn of a modern Renaissance, and as always has been the case, we shall be guided by the fundamental principles of the classic. It will be a modern Renaissance because it will be characterized by the conditions of modern life. It will be the work of the Renaissance architect solving new problems, adapting his art to an honest and natural treatment of new materials and conditions. Will he not also be unconsciously influenced by the twentieth-century spirit of economy and by the application of his art to all modern industries and speculations?

Only when we come to recognize our true historic position and the principles of continuity in history, when we allow the spirit of our life to be the spirit of our style, recognizing first of all that form and all design are the natural and legitimate outcome of the nature or purpose of the object to be made—only then can we hope to find a real style everywhere asserting itself. Then we shall see that consistency of style which has existed in all times until the present generation; then shall we find it in every performance of man's ingenuity, in the work of the artist or the artisan, from the smallest and most insignificant jewel or book-cover to the noblest monument of human invention or creation, from the most ordinary kitchen utensil to the richest and most costly furniture or decoration that adorns our dwelling.

We must all work and wait patiently for the day to come when we shall work in unison with our time. Our Renaissance must not be merely archæological—the literal following of certain periods of the style. To build a French Louis XII or Francis I or Louis XIV house, or to make an Italian *cinquecento* design, is indisputably not modern architecture. No architect, until our times, slavishly followed the characteristics of any particular period, but he used all that he could get from what preceded him, solving such new problems as were the imperatives of his position.

What did a man like Pierre Lescot, the architect of the Henry II Court of the Louvre, endeavor to do? It would have been impossible for him actually to define the style of his own period. That is for us, his successors, to do. For him the question was how to meet the new demands of contemporaneous life. He studied all that he could find in classic and Renaissance precedents applicable to his problem. He composed, never copying, and always with that artistic sense and the sense of the fitness of things, which were capable of realizing what would be harmonious in his work. In the same way all architects, at all times, contributed to a contemporaneous architecture, invariably with modifications to meet new conditions. This must be done with a scholarly appreciation of that harmonious result which comes only from a thorough education. So with freedom of the imagination and unity of design an architecture is secured expressive of its time.

How is it with us in this country? Not only do many architects slavishly follow the character of some selected period, but they also deliberately take entire *motifs* of composition from other times and other places to patch and apply them to our new conditions and new life. Every man's conscience must speak for itself as to whether such plagiarism is right; but while the moral aspect of this question has very little to do with art, yet intellectually such imitative work, though seemingly successful, positively stifles originality, imagination and every effort to advance in the right direction.

The way is now prepared for us to endeavor to indicate what are some of the principal causes of the modern confusion in style. With us Americans, an excessive anxiety to the original is one of the causes of no end of evil. The imagination should be kept



under control by given principles. We must have ability to discern what is good among our own creations and courage to reject what is bad. Originality is a spontaneous effort to do work in the simplest and most natural way. The conditions are never twice alike; each case is new. We must begin our study with the floor plan, and then interpret that floor plan in the elevation, using forms, details and sometimes motives, with natural variations and improvements on what has gone before. The true artist leaves his temperament and individuality to take care of themselves.

Some say that if this is all that we are doing there is nothing new in art; but if we compose in the right way, there can be nothing that is not new. Surely you would not condemn nature for not being original because there is a certain similarity between the claw of a bird and the foot of a dog, or between the wing of a bird and the fin of a fish. The *ensemble* of each creature is the natural result of successive stages of life, with variations of the different parts according to the principles of evolution. There are countless structural correspondencies in the skeletons of organic life, but these show the wonderful unity of the universe; and yet, notwithstanding this unity, nature is flooded with an infinite variety of forms and species of life.

We must logically interpret the practical conditions before us, no matter what they are. No work to be done is ever so arbitrary in its practical demands but that the art is elastic and broad enough to give these demands thorough satisfaction in more than a score of different ways. If only the artist will accept such practical imperatives as are reasonable, if only he will welcome them, one and all, as friendly opportunities for loyal and honest expression in his architecture, he will find that these very conditions will do more than all else besides for his real progress and for the development of contemporaneous art in composition.

The architects in the early history of our country were distinctly modern and closely related in their work to their contemporaries in Europe. They seem not only to have inherited traditions, but to have religiously adhered to them. I believe that it is because of this that the genuine and naïve character of their work, which was of its period, still has a charm for us which cannot be imitated. McComb, Bullfinch, Thornton, Letrobe, L'Enfant, Andrew Hamilton, Strickland and Walters were sufficiently American and distinctly modern, working in the right

direction. Upjohn and Renwick, alas! men of talent, were misled by the confusion of their times—the beginning of this modern chaos, the so-called Victorian-Gothic period.

Gifted as Richardson was, and great as his personality was, his work is always easily distinguished, because of its excellent quality, from the so-called Romanesque of his followers. But I fear the good he did was largely undone because of the bad influence of his work upon his profession—stumpy columns, squat arches and rounded corners, without Richardson, form a disease from which we are only just recovering. McComb and Bullfinch would probably have frowned upon Hunt for attempting to graft the transitional Loire architecture of the fifteenth century upon American soil, and I believe all will agree that the principal good he accomplished was due to the great distinction of his art, and the moral character of the man himself, rather than to the general influence and direction of his work.

McKim's name at this time we mention almost with bated breath. Whether he was right or wrong, whether we agree with him or not, in wanting to revive the art of Bramante, St. Galo and Peruzzi in the nineteenth century, he had perhaps more of the true sense of beauty than any of his predecessors. His was the art of the man who loved the doing of it without thought of credit, and this makes itself felt in every example of his work, which was always refined, personal and with a distinctly more classic tendency in his most recent work.

We have seen that the life of an epoch makes its impress upon its architecture. It is equally true that the architecture of a people helps to form and model its character. If there is beauty in the plans of our cities, and in the buildings which form our public squares and highways, its good influence will make itself felt upon every passer-by. Beauty in our buildings is an open book of involuntary education and refinement, and it uplifts and ennobles human character; it is a song and a sermon without words. It inculcates in a people a true sense of dignity, a sense of reverence and a respect for tradition, and it makes an atmosphere in its environment which breeds the proper kind of contentment—that kind of contentment which stimulates ambition.

But, above all, it cultivates the sense of beauty itself, which is as important a factor in a well-formed character as is the sense of humor and almost as necessary as the sense of honor. It is,

I believe, a law of the universe that the forms of life which are fittest to survive, and the very universe itself, are beautiful in form and color. Natural selection is beautifully expressed, ugliness and deformity are synonymous, and so, in the economy of life, what would survive must be beautifully expressed.

If a story is to live it must be told with art, and a message of truth will carry further and be of more lasting service if beautifully expressed. There is literary style in every good book, however personal or simply written. Beauty of design and line in construction builds well, and with greater economy and endurance than construction which is mere engineering. The qualitative side first, then the quantitative side of construction should be considered. The practical and the artistic are inseparable. There is beauty in nature because all nature is a practical problem well solved. The truly educated architect will never sacrifice the practical side of his problem. The great economic as well as architectural calamities have been performed by so-called practical men with an experience mostly bad and with no education.

Construction should first be designed, then calculated. Know where you want to go before seeking a way to go there. The separation of the architect and the modern engineer has been brought about principally because of the innovation of railroads and steel construction.

The engineer and architect should work hand in hand at the very inception of the structural design. The architect should not be called in, as is generally the case, to decorate badly designed construction with useless ornament. We should meet these new conditions of life in construction, with art in the very skeleton of the construction itself, and even so, with this unfortunate separation of engineering and architecture, something should be done to bring them closer together, and they should join forces at the very beginning of every important undertaking; otherwise we shall suffer for it even as we have already, and it is only by being forewarned that we can forestall the consequences.

When we think of what the past ages have done for us, should we not be more considerate of those that are yet to come? A great tide of historic information has constantly flowed through the channel of monuments erected by successive civilizations, and we can almost live in the past through its monuments.

The recently discovered buried cities of Assyria give us a vivid idea of a civilization lost to history. The Pyramid of Cheops and the Temples of Karnak and Luxor tell us more of that ingenuity which we cannot fathom, and the grandeur of the life and history of the Egyptian people, than the scattered and withered documents or fragments of inscriptions that have chanced to survive the crumbling influences of time. The Parthenon and the Erechtheum bespeak the intellectual refinement of the Greeks as much as their epic poems or their philosophy. The triumphal arches, the aqueducts, the Pantheon and the Basilicas of Rome tell us more of the great constructive genius of the early Republic and the Empire of the Cæsars than the fragmentary and contradictory annals of wars and political intrigues.

The unsurpassed and inspiring beauty of the Gothic cathedrals which bewilders us, and the cloisters which enchant us, impress on our minds a living picture of the feverish and morbid aspiration of mediæval times—a civilization which must have had mingled with its mysticism an intellectual and spiritual grandeur which the so-called Dark Ages of the historian have failed adequately to record, and here, in and around Washington and in our own country in general, even amid the all-absorbing work of constructing a new government, our people found time to speak to us to-day in the silent language of their simple architecture, of the temperament and character of our forefathers.

Consider the time in which we are now living. Will our monuments adequately record the splendid achievements of our contemporaneous life,—the spirit of modern justice and liberty,—the progress of modern science,—the genius of modern invention and discovery,—the elevated character of our institutions? Will disorder and confusion in our architecture express the intelligence of this twentieth century? Would that those in authority might learn a lesson from the past, and awaken in their wisdom to build our national monuments more worthy of the dignity of this great nation, and more expressive of this wonderful contemporaneous life!

THOMAS HASTINGS.